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ABSTRACT

To help teachers understand or evaluate young children's play, six features of play are described. These features, derived from research, are: (1) intrinsic motivation; (2) attention to means rather than ends; (3) nonliteral behavior; (4) freedom from external rules; (5) self rather than object; and (6) active engagement. Related documents from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and a list of references are provided. (DC)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN'S PLAY. Short Report.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education

ERIC Clearinghouse on
Elementary and Early Childhood Education

Short Report

Characteristics of Children's Play

WHILE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT the value of play for children's development are not new, renewed interest in upgrading basic skills seems to have sparked the need for those involved in the care and instruction of preschool and kindergarten children to examine the issue once again. Dr. Millie Almy and her colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley — Patricia Monighan, Barbara Scales, and Judith Van Hoorn — suggest that it may be helpful for teachers to consider the six features summarized below when attempting to understand or evaluate young children's play.*

1. Intrinsic motivation. One characteristic of interest in relation to children's play is intrinsic motivation, or a self-directed interest in the activity at hand. Intrinsic motivation may be observable in a self-initiated activity (such as playing at being Wonder Woman, for example), or it may result from an activity initiated by the teacher (such as a lotto game or block construction project). Intrinsically motivating activities are also likely to permit the child to resolve discrepancies between the novel and the familiar (Berlyne, 1960; Bruner, 1972). For instance, pretense play with baby dolls following the birth of a sibling may help a preschooler understand his or her feelings about this event.

2. Attention to means rather than ends. In addition to being motivated intrinsically, a child engaged in play is less concerned with a particular goal than with the means of achieving it. What "goals" do exist within play are self-imposed, and may thus change as the activity proceeds. For example, when engaged in play involving the preparation of dinner, one kindergartener took time to "iron" a plastic vegetable with a toy iron, then returned to the original task of preparing the meal. Trying out patterns of familiar thought and action within the play situation appears to help develop the child's ability to think and solve problems (Smith & Dutton, 1979; Vandenberg, 1980). Curricula that focus only on goal-specific activities may diminish the sense of exhilaration and discovery that frequently accompanies children's play.

3. Nonliteral behavior. Beginning as early as the first year of life and becoming a dominant feature of preschool play, nonliteral behavior involves the exercise of "make-believe." One preschooler, for example, made "cream of mosquito" soup, pretending that small sandbox pebbles were the mosquitoes. According to researchers, the conception of objects and situations within the "as if" frame of reference is thought to contribute to the child's later skill in hypothetical reasoning and understanding of abstract symbols (Fagen, 1976; Fein, 1981) and logical transformations (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977).

4. Freedom from external rules. Often cited as a characteristic to differentiate children's play from their behavior within rule-based games, this feature presents something of a paradox. Although external rules do not exist for play, play behavior within imaginative contexts does possess implicit rules. For example, the behaviors of two children playing, respectively, the roles of veterinarian and wounded dog express a clear understanding of the expectations for the doctor/patient relationship. Within the play context, children may also generate and adapt intrinsic rules through negotiation (Garvey, 1977; Schwartzman, 1978). Following such rules may prepare the child to later engage in games with collective rules, or even provide a sense of the rules of society at large (Mead, 1934).

5. Self rather than object. In play, activity is "self-referenced"; in other words, the child relates to a familiar object in an open-ended manner and is free to manipulate that object in any way he or she wishes. Novel materials are likely to be met by the child with an exploration strategy. When exploring, the properties of the unfamiliar object are uppermost in the child's attention, as opposed to his or her own responses to that object. Some evidence suggests that play with an object before it has been fully explored may limit the child's discovery of its specific properties (Hutt, 1979). For example, teachers in one day care center noted that children never used certain hand puppets except in the way initially demonstrated by the teachers. Encouraging a balance of exploration and play, or the novel and the familiar, may be an important planning issue for those implementing programs for young children.

6. Active engagement. The zest that preschool children bring to play is evident in their overt actions and verbalizations, as well as in their unwillingness to be distracted from play activities. As children grow older, their interest may be interiorized, becoming less readily discernible to the adult observer. Nonetheless, the question of how actively young children are participating in play is an important one for the classroom teacher or caregiver, who must frequently assess whether the class as a whole is involved during the times scheduled for play activities.

*The text of this report has been derived from a section of Dr. Almy and colleagues' paper "Recent Research on Play: The Perspective of the Teacher." Available as ED 219 126 (43p.), the paper will also soon be published in *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education, Vol. 5*, Lilian G. Katz (Ed.), Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, in press.

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